

Unshackled

Stories of Transformed Lives

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Chapter Twelve

Royal Leeson in the Shadows

IF ROYAL LEESON hadn't met his old army captain in Peoria, Illinois, in 1924, he wouldn't have had cash enough to get to Chicago. And if he hadn't gotten there, he might not have. But that's the story.

Twenty-five-year-old Royal ambled down the main street of Peoria. His face was sunburned and dirty, and one coat sleeve was ripped at the elbow. He viewed the blonde coming toward him.

"Excuse me, lady. I'm a stranger in Peoria and I'm awful hungry. Could you let me have a-?" The blonde went by fast, as close to the edge of the sidewalk as she could walk. "O.K., O.K., Cutie, forget it."

A man in uniform turned the corner. Royal stopped in front of him. He felt good when he was putting the touch on an officer. After all, he'd been an army man.

"Oh, Mister, could you spare a dime for a bite to eat?"

"Sure you want it for food, Buddy?" the officer asked.

"Yeah, I-" Royal broke off. Can a guy you've known years ago drop from the blue onto a street in Peoria, Illinois? This one had. "Captain, Captain Stacey."

The man in the uniform started. "Why, it's Royal Leeson. What are you doing here, Leeson?"

"What does it look like, Captain?" He wasn't the mayor of Peoria and he wasn't out walking his best girl on Sunday afternoon.

"Are you out of a job?" There was concern in the Captain's voice.

"Sure," Royal blustered. "But just temporarily." No use letting a guy's sympathy stall you. Money, not sympathy - that's what he wanted.

"Look, could you let me have a buck, Captain Stacey?

That's all I need to get something to eat and push on to Chicago."

"Well, sure, Leeson." The Captain unfolded his leather wallet. He held the dollar in his hand for a second. "You've got something to do when you get to Chicago?" he asked.

Royal's hand reached for the dollar. "Sure, sure. I always do fine in Chicago. Now how about it, Captain? Thanks."

Royal caught the next bus to Chicago. He stared moodily out at the flat Illinois fields. When you run into a guy out of the past like that, your mind starts spinning around and around, playing records of a lot of life you thought you'd forgotten, and want to forget.

There was his year in the army. And before that, his father and his mother and home. He hadn't always been as now. But his breaks had been bad from the beginning.

Like school - he hadn't wanted to go to school at all.

Until he was ten, his dad listened to his noise and didn't force him. But when he was ten, his dad was fed up. "No more of this fooling around, young man. You'll go back to school tomorrow or you'll wear the stripes from not going for a month."

"Aw, no, Dad," Royal pleaded. "I'm taller than any guy in that old first grade. I stick way up in my seat over anybody else."

"I can't help it if you're older than the other kids. It's your own fault for not starting sooner. Go on upstairs and go to bed and be down for breakfast on time. Or you'll get such a licking you won't be able to sit down at all."

He had a rough time in school. Principal Deavers caught him smoking on the playground. "One more time and you'll be expelled."

Deavers warned him. "And the little Johnson girl says you've been using profane language at recess." Deavers tapped his desk with a pencil. "Is this true?"

"Let her keep her nasty little old mouth shut," Royal retorted.

"You might try doing the same, Royal. One more offense, missing school, smoking or swearing, and you'll be expelled. You're still just a little boy in the second grade, you know, even if you are twelve years old."

But Deavers had been all wrong. He wasn't a little boy. In his dad's pool room, he was a man.

"Hey, lad, come on and roll them with us," the customers said. "Penny a toss and have a cigarette for luck. The way you handle that weed, nobody would ever guess you're just twelve."

There was no feeling of being a big dumb ox in the pool room. In a way, he didn't mind getting caught at that crap game in the sixth grade cloakroom. That settled any question about going back to school.

Getting thrown out of school was a big relief in one way. But after that, he wanted to prove he was good for something. So he left home. He proved at sixteen, he could do a man's job on the road, swinging a shovel.

The record still spun around. Now it was his year in the army. He saw just enough of the country to want to see more. After that, he had the roaming blues. Chicago, St. Louis, Memphis-.

The bus was rumbling through Chicago's South Side.

Royal scrubbed at the dirty window with his coat sleeve, but he saw nothing but rows of tenements so alike they looked like children from an orphanage out in their afternoon best.

Chicago was as good as any other city, and as bad. He had slept in jails and on doorsteps in all of them; rolled his dice and picked up his cash with odd jobs from coast to coast.

"Last stop," the bus driver yelled.

Sure, Chicago would do for a while. The stew's no greasier in the twenty-five cent restaurants than in any other U.S. city, he figured. He wasn't sentimental about any of them.

Royal landed on West Madison right away. For two' days he worked in a restaurant ladling out greasy stew and got paid four dollars. Then he got "roaring" drunk.

When he woke up, he was lying on the cement floor in a cell in the Des Plaines police station. Scattered on the floor were several dozen other drunks from the night before.

Royal stretched and tried to crawl to his knees. His head pounded.

"Where are we?" he muttered. "What town?"

"The crossroads of America, my friend, Chicago!" the drunk beside him on the floor slurred.

"Hope they give me some time," Royal said. "I'd like to eat regular for ten days or so. Maybe get some time to think over what my next move will be."

The drunk rolled over. "They won't give you no time. County jail is too crowded this time of year. Don't get your hopes up. You'll be back on the street an hour from now."

Royal found out the Chicago drunk knew his Chicago jails. Within an hour, Royal was out on the street again.

From the Salvation Army he picked up a ticket for three rolls and a cup of coffee at a Chinese restaurant on State Street near Van Buren. Three rolls can taste like stew when you haven't eaten in a while.

The rest of the morning he wandered around that part of town, dozed in a deserted doorway until a policeman chased him. Toward evening it started to rain. Got to have a flop for tonight, Royal thought. Panhandling was as good as any way to get the cash.

"Please, Mister, can you spare some dough for a bed in all this weather?"

A man with a red face dropped a dime in Royal's hand.

"Thank you, Sir, thank you."

The policeman came up from nowhere. "Move on, you bum. No begging here. The law says so. Move on." Royal moved on. "Big flat foot," he grunted.

The rain made rivers of Chicago dirt down his face. He turned up his coat collar. He had to have money. There was always money on the Gold Coast of Chicago. Royal leaned into the rain and started north.

It would be a cinch to haul some guy into an alley and slug him. Up there on the Gold Coast, a guy would have at least twenty dollars on him. Then, to find a crap game and turn twenty into a hundred in no time. Running his hand into his pocket, Royal patted his loaded dice.

Royal headed north on South State Street. He felt good already. He should have done this a long time ago. Nothing to it. He was in the six hundred block when he heard a man calling. "Hey, come on in out of the rain, fellow. Come on in."

Royal ducked his head to one side. The sign over the man's head said, "Pacific Garden Mission."

"Oh, yes." He slowed down. "Pacific Garden Mission.

What gets into you Christers to make you stand outside in weather like this and throw your hooks into guys like me minding my own business?"

"Just thought you'd like to get in out of the rain. But that's O.K. No hooks. Just keep on going, Buddy. Only here, read this sometime when your curiosity gets the best of you."

"Who's curious?"

"Oh, a guy like you, down on his luck, tired, hungry. You're bound to be curious. What it's all about, why are you here, where are you going?"

"You don't know what you're talking about, you lily-white Christer."

"Listen Buddy, my jacket was as filthy as that coat of yours when I stumbled in here for the first time."

"You?"

"Sure. Come on in. It's nice and warm and dry and all you have to do is sit down. Maybe get that curiosity satisfied."

Royal looked hard at the man. It wouldn't hurt to get warm. Give the rain a chance to stop, and the boys on the North Side to get their crap games in full swing.

He walked into the mission. He heard the music first, and then a tall man in the front of the room said. "That's the melody to the chorus,

'Somewhere in the shadows, you'll find JESUS,
standing in the shadows,
you'll find Him,
and you'll know Him by the nail-prints on His hands!'"

"For the benefit of those of you who find yourselves at the Pacific Garden Mission for the first time, that song is well-loved around Chicago's Skid Row. And believe me, somewhere in the shadows, you will find JESUS."

Royal slouched down in his chair. The man went on talking. "If you really believe that JESUS CHRIST died on the cross for you, then you can have freedom from the shackles of your sin here on earth. You can have eternal life, too.

"All GOD asks us to do is hold our empty hands up and take this gift. We can't understand it, but those of us who have dared take it know it is the only true reality. The Bible says, '**All we like sheep have gone astray. The Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all.**'

"Come unto me, all ye who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest."

This religion stuff was twaddle, of course. Yet Royal felt something pushing him out into the mission aisle. Go down front for prayer? When your coat is ripped down the back and smells of stale grease and beer? You don't parade even in front of characters like yourself. So Royal sat still.

"Here, put my coat on," the man who'd done the talking up front said to Royal Leeson later. "Your coat looks wet, fellow. Take mine and let's go into the prayer room and give you a reason for living."

This was crazy. The superintendent of the mission handing him a coat when he usually had to beg an hour for a dime? But Royal didn't let that tempt him into any prayer room; he did stay around at the mission for the rest of the night and shelved his plan for finding a Gold Coast man with a wad in his wallet.

For a week, Leeson stayed at the mission, listening to the messages. This business about JESUS CHRIST he couldn't figure out.

At the end of a week, he stopped trying. He quit the mission. "I'm too rotten to get converted; I'll just beat some likely-looking 'sucker' on the head like I planned to do last week. I'll grab a few bucks and leave town right away. I'll leave that mission a long way behind."

The Superior Street alley was halfway down the block from Michigan Avenue. Not too many around at eleven o'clock. On Superior Street, some well-dressed gentlemen were likely to stuff a fifty dollar bill in their back pockets before starting out for an evening's fun, he figured.

"Just like this fancy neighborhood to keep the alleys so clean that there isn't even a good garbage can to hide behind." Royal clenched his length of lead pipe harder. In his fists, he could feel his pulse pounding.

"I'll just back up here and slip into the shadows." "Shadows" - he'd heard that before.

"Standing in the shadows, you'll find Him,
and you'll know Him by the nail-prints in His hands."

He was in the shadows now, wasn't he?

"All we like sheep have gone astray. The Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all"

"Forget it," Royal told himself.

The shadow of the lamp post on the curb fell across the shadow of the building in a dark pattern. Royal flattened against the wall, became part of the pattern. He watched two feet coming blithely along the sidewalk. He could tell they belonged to a young fellow, probably wearing a tweed overcoat and a Homburg. A young fellow, who probably ate lobster in the best hotels and drank at the best bars. Royal watched those feet come across the mouth of the alley, into the pattern of shadows.

"Come unto me, all ye who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest." 'He won't stop pursuing you; He'll be waiting in the darkness outside."

"O.K., Lord," Royal said.

With his hand gripping the lead pipe, he moved out of the shadows. He stood in front of the young fellow in the Homburg.

"Evening," Royal said.

"Good evening," the man answered haughtily. Beautiful night? There wasn't a doubt of it as Royal hurried back to the Pacific Garden Mission. He had found CHRIST in the shadows and to make sure he hurried to the Mission.

There have been other shadows in Royal Leeson's life since then. The shadows of smudge and soot on the faces of the Skid Row derelicts to whom he has told CHRIST's love. The shadows of

great trees in a South American forest where he has served as missionary for sixteen years, shadows on careworn faces in the church of which he later became pastor, where they sing,

"Somewhere in the shadows, you'll find JESUS,
you'll know Him by the nail-prints in His hands."

~ end of chapter 12 ~
